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ABSTRACT

Data from a research project on the value and impact of public library book reading have provided insights into the role of the public library in the reading experience. The principle of equity of access was seen as crucial, in that it provided everyone with the opportunity to encounter reading material. Respondents also compared the buying and borrowing experience. Several described how borrowing encouraged them to take risks with their reading. Others favored borrowing on ecological grounds. The bookshop was described as a "consumerist experience" whereas the library invoked a feeling of citizenship. Respondents regarded the range of stock on offer as a crucial factor. A good library allowed people to experiment with their reading. This was not perceived to be the case in all services, and there was some criticism of the literary and physical quality of the material on offer. The range of stock was also crucial to another library activity; that of browsing. Respondents also described the library as a place, and identified intangible benefits provided by the service. In analyzing the data it is clear that, for many, the positive factors outweigh the negative but that the library experience can comprise both. (Contains 17 references.) (Author)

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The public library and the reading experience

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Abstract:

Data from a research project on the value and impact of public library book reading have provided insights into the role of the public library in the reading experience. The principle of equity of access was seen as crucial, in that it provided everyone with the opportunity to encounter reading material. Respondents also compared the buying and borrowing experience. Several described how borrowing encouraged them to take risks with their reading. Others favoured borrowing on ecological grounds. The bookshop was described as a "consumerist experience" whereas the library invoked a feeling of citizenship.

Respondents regarded the range of stock on offer as a crucial factor. A good library allowed people to experiment with their reading. This was not perceived to be the case in all services, and there was some criticism of the literary and physical quality of the material on offer. The range of stock was also crucial to another library activity; that of browsing. Respondents also described the library as a place, and identified intangible benefits provided by the service. In analysing the data it is clear that, for many, the positive factors outweigh the negative but that the library experience can comprise both.

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Note for readers

In this paper, quotations provided during the course of the research have been included to illustrate the findings. These are presented verbatim and consequently will not always be grammatically correct. Punctuation has been added, it is hoped in a way that is faithful to the delivery of the dialogue, to make the text more readily intelligible to the reader. Information was given in confidence, and therefore statements are presented anonymously. However, in order to enable readers to follow a particular line of argument, and provide some basic demographic details, while at the same time respecting the trust of respondents, the following system has been applied:

Library Authorities are given a number 1 to 12.
For focus group participants the following applies:

- Male=M Female =F
- Age groups:

18-21 = 21	45-54 = 45	75–over = 75
22-29 = 22	55-64 = 55	
30-44 = 30	65-74 = 65	

- Group number as allocated by the research team

Data from an AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) funded research project (Toyne & Usherwood 2001) on the value and impact of public library book reading have produced some fascinating insights in to the role of the public library in the reading experience. Interviews with library professionals, and focus groups held with readers and non-readers, have provided evidence on the value of reading, and the role of the public library in providing public access to a range of material. The data on why people read have been considered elsewhere (Usherwood &Toyne 2001) and the present paper is primarily concerned with the role played by the public library in the reading experience.

The library as a place

The data show that the library can affect the reading experience even before people pick up a book. Several participants described how their journeys into imaginary worlds began as soon as they went through the library door.

- *It was a magic world to go into the library, it still is. Those rows upon rows of books. [M/65/27].*

It is clear that a well- stocked public library can be a visual stimulus to the reading experience.

- *It's seeing all those shelves of fiction that excites us. [F/45/12].*
- *It [the library] tends to act as a stimulus. [F/55/13].*

In addition the visual impact of the library, including the image of readers browsing along the shelves, can help encourage a culture of reading. In the words of a parent:
it's really exciting for [children] to go and have an experience of a place where there's lots of books. They see other readers as well. I think it engenders reading into their culture. [F/30/7].

The libraryness factor

Respondents went on to discuss the intangible benefits provided by the library. In a sense, their explanations re-inforce what other commentators have termed the "libraryness" factor (Greenhalgh et al.: 1995). One described how, many years ago, a Shropshire library had turned the reading experience into a total experience.

I would go to this branch library, which was a red brick slated roof, single story piece of Shropshire. It looked a bit like a mortuary. Through these dark streets, inside to a sort of haven. It was warm, there were two burning cast iron stoves, there was a light at the end and it was quiet. So there were these conditions of comfort: warmth, light and quiet. And an eccentric librarian who looked like he'd been drawn out of "Through the Looking Glass". All of which added to an experience and I think it was and is for me a total experience. [M/65/27].

At other times the library was compared to the home with people saying.

- *I'm at home here; I'm welcome here. [M/45/13].*
- *It has such amenities and stock, I feel at home there. [F/65/21].*

A sense of home or belonging was invoked in various ways. For some, it was simply the fact that:

- *We can sit down and try a book out. [F/55/9].* [and that] *-Everyone is welcome; you can spend the whole day in there. There's space for you to sit. [F/45/19].*

Other respondents were more critical. The lack of cloakrooms was mentioned frequently by those who had care of young children. It was also a common view that coffee bars or the facility to get a drink should be more readily available in libraries.

- *It's so much more pleasurable if you can get a drink in a coffee bar in the library. You can really take your time then. [F/45/5].*
- *Libraries need to have coffee bars away from the shelves where people can test the books. Also, they could then chat to other readers. (Arts & Cultural worker [3]).*

Library buildings were sometimes viewed negatively in comparison to other providers of leisure pursuits. Several felt that they can sometimes appear to be intimidating to a non-user. The poor image of some libraries was mentioned as a reason why people did not read or use the library. Those who were library users felt that the stereotypical view was not entirely accurate but recognized nonetheless that such negative images could be powerful and inhibit people. A bad experience might be enough to prevent people from ever returning. Two things were seen as crucial. The attitude of staff and the layout of the entrance to the library.

Equity of Access

The people who took part in the research placed great emphasis on the public library's principle of equity of access. It was seen as critical in that it gave everybody an opportunity to participate in the reading experience. In the words of one:

- *... it doesn't matter who you are, or what your background is, you are able to enjoy what the library has to offer. Everyone is treated the same. Everyone is given a chance.*

This opportunity was regarded as vital in the formation of the reader and in helping to establish the reading habit from a very early age.

- *I joined the library when I was eight years old. I used to spend all of Saturday mornings there choosing my three books. I loved it. It's a habit that has stayed with me. [F/55/6].*

This free access was seen by many as crucial in maintaining a love of reading. They felt that if they could only buy books their reading would be far more limited. Purchasing books was simply beyond their budget.

- *It's too expensive to buy books; I can't afford to buy them.* [F/65/23].
- *I can't afford them; it's as simple as that.* [F/55/17].

Even some of those in rather better economic circumstances admitted that they could not afford to buy at the rate at which they read, and that without the library their reading experience would be greatly restricted.

- *From a merely financial point of view, I couldn't possibly afford to buy all the books I want to read. [M/45/13].*
- *I like the fact that I can get a large number of books out in any one visit. I always take the maximum number.* [F/55/27].

A public librarian confirmed that:

- *It's the fact that it's free. If you just stood in the library and saw how many people came in, it was like panic buying before Christmas. People come in and they say that they want a good supply of books to tide them over the holiday. People really feel that they need something to read. [5].*

All of the respondents commented on the value of the free service but many felt that the introduction of charges into other parts of the service was a prohibitive factor. For instance, there was widespread agreement that fines could have a negative impact. Some felt that they restricted their reading experience. The fear of returning books late, and subsequently being made to pay, made them reluctant to borrow. For others, the cost of the fine was psychological rather than economic. Respondents felt that the introduction of fines meant that they were being punished by the service. This was viewed very negatively.

- *I was always in trouble for being late. I was made to feel guilty. [F/30/10].* There was also some criticism of reservation charges, in particular the time taken to satisfy reservations and the operation of concessionary rates.

In addition to the economic barriers, physical ones can also be a crucial factor in determining the usage of the library. Often, these were discussed in relation to physical access into the building. One respondent had undertaken a taster course on the enjoyment of literature. It had been designed for people with disabilities but of the eleven people who took it, seven experienced difficulties getting into libraries and had been unable to access books. She observed:

there's a huge potential for people, for disabled people to get into libraries if they are accessible and that's one of the things. I think if you are looking at libraries, [you wonder] is it wheelchair friendly and accessible? They can't see, they'd probably find it hard to hold books. [F/45/7].

In addition, respondents felt that reduced opening hours restricted their use of reading material. In line with other research (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998), this was seen as a particular problem by those in full time work. The reduction in opening hours was recognised as a problem across all of the interview groups. The location of the library was also shown to have an impact. Many respondents described how the fact that a library was nearby had helped to establish their reading habit.

- *Well, I think with it being near, it's there for us and if it wasn't here you probably wouldn't read as much. [M/45/13].*
- *I joined the library when I was quite young. I used it an awful lot, most Saturdays, because it was only five minutes away. It was handy. [F/55/6].*

In particular older members of the community

need .. local libraries for physical reasons. As we've got older we're losing so much of the things that matter in life... we need the local ones. [F/55/23].

- *It's difficult to catch a bus into town. The books are so heavy I can only manage two at a time. I come here about three times a week. If I had to do a trip into town I'd only get two books a week. [F/65/25].*

Recent initiatives taking reading beyond the walls of the library were regarded very positively. To some extent they were seen to reduce the impact of reduced opening hours. In addition they were regarded as a valuable in attracting new people to reading. An arts worker described how she had:
taken books into factories and offices. Members of staff are able to choose in their lunch hour. For some, this service is in addition to them visiting their local library. For others, it has established them as library users. They are reading more than they otherwise would do. I've had really positive feedback. [3].

Users also welcomed this extension of the library service beyond the library building and felt that it was something that should be developed. One woman who found out that she could get books at the health centre stated:
That's great 'cos it's open five days a week from early morning 'til about six. I even joined the library there. The kids love it and also it helps when they go for health check-ups and injections. The health centre is more of a fun place for them now. [F/30/19].

The housebound service was also regarded as playing an invaluable role for those who were no longer physically able to visit the library. As one respondent observed

- *I wouldn't read very much if the library didn't bring the books to my home. I'd just sit here twiddling my thumbs all day. [F/75/8].*

Some had only started using the library service as housebound users. They had seen the library delivering books to neighbours and had been introduced to the service that way. This led them to develop the reading habit in later life.

- *I didn't read much and then when my husband died, I was quite depressed. I'd never been in a library but Grace said why don't you read so and so. I'm not a great reader but I enjoy a novel once a fortnight and I just like knowing that there's a new book there if I want it. They come every couple of weeks and it's a good service. [F/65/8].*

Although the housebound service was generally held in high esteem, there was some criticism that it is not sufficiently promoted. Three of the authorities included in the research served large rural populations. Consequently, the importance of the provision of the mobile library service was stressed repeatedly. Users and policy makers alike described it as a vital aspect of the service.

The Borrowing Experience

When discussing the act of choosing a book, respondents often compared the buying and borrowing experience. Recent commentators have examined the relationship between the two experiences, and explored the situations in which people would choose one as opposed to the other (Sumsion 1992; England 1992; Book Marketing/Reading Partnership 2000; Bolam 2000; Mann 1971). As indicated earlier the fact that material is available free of charge clearly influences the borrowing experience. *Reading the Situation,* suggested that the other most commonly given reason for borrowing as opposed to buying books was that people "don't have space for all books [they] want to read". (Book Marketing 2000:119). The respondents included in the Sheffield research confirmed this finding. One remarking:

- *My house is full, the shelves are packed twofold and there is no more room. [F/45/8].*
- *I've got shelves in just about every room of the house, but we are struggling now. My husband has told me, no more ...[F/45/12].*

For these people, the library fulfils the important function of supplying a large quantity of books that they can read and return without problems of storage. Some indicated they felt good about borrowing on ecological grounds, as it was a form of recycling. A view repeated recently in the *Financial Times*, which observed: "Think how many trees we have to destroy in order to have our very own copy of most books. And think how daft that is when we spend so little time reading them" (*Financial Times* 2002).

Several participants in the study also described how the ability to borrow encouraged them to take risks with their reading. Others used the library to help them decide whether or not to purchase a title:

- *I tend to use the library as a first sift through literature. I then buy them. [M/30/26].*
- *Sometimes I borrow from the library, and it makes such an impact on me that I can't bear to return it. I fear being bereft of that experience, so I have to go out and buy it. [F/30/7].*

An independent bookseller felt that by referring his customers to the library for a "free trial", he was assisting them and ensuring good customer practice,

- *If they are not sure I tell them to go to the library and try it out. If they enjoy it they usually come back and buy a copy. But it saves them money. [M/55/6].*

For many respondents the library was the preferred place from which to obtain reading material. They felt that they: *belong in a library,* [observing that] *they are not as intimidating as a bookshop. [F/55/13].*

However, times and behaviour are changing and some of the modern book superstores now encourage people to stay through the provision of easy chairs and coffee. Writing from an American perspective Miller (1999) states that, these "superstores…not only carry an impressive number of titles, but have also adopted the rhetoric of community service". A recent dissertation at the University of Sheffield examined this matter further and suggests that middle income users are decreasing their use of the library and increasing their use of the bookstore. Income appears to influence the extent to which each site is actually used. The library and the bookstore may be acting as "community space" for different communities largely (although not wholly) separated by income. (Cartwright 2001)

For many people the essence of the public library experience was:
The fact that there's such a wide stock and it's available, [and] *the effect that has on our reading experience is immense as in contrast to a bookshop, however big it is.* It was felt that, the *relationship of a book you can pay for is totally different to what we're describing which is to walk in, and select any book that they want.*

"you go into a bookshop, yes to browse to a certain extent, but they're a business, they obviously want you to buy something...
On the other hand the library was regarded as: *a very multi-dimensional cultural experience, as opposed to going into a bookshop and having a money transaction. That's a consumerist experience. [13].*

The people engaged in that discussion identified going into a bookshop as a "consumerist experience" while the public library was perceived to promote "an idea of citizenship above that of the consumer" (Greenhalgh, et al.1995: 57). Several respondents felt that they had greater power as library borrowers, in the sense that their reading requirements were the most important factor to be considered. Whereas:

- *When I go in a bookshop I check to see what I can afford. That is a big part of my decision. In a library my decision for choosing to read or not read a book is fundamentally different. I dictate the choice, not my wallet. It is a much more satisfying experience. [F/30/17].*

Range of stock

A further crucial element offered by the library service is the range of the stock on offer. This range of material was perceived to encourage people to experiment and take risks with their reading. It enabled readers to develop and grow because:
it is economical to try out books in the library. They are not wasting their money. They are safe to try out new books or authors. (Library manager [1]).

- *It broadens what you read, I've read new writers, I wouldn't have done if I had to pay everytime. [F/45/2].*

Observations that confirm Mann's statement of three decades ago that: "The great advantage of the library is the wide range of novels available for choosing and the fact that failure-choosing a novel that the reader does not enjoy costs nothing." (1971:15)

An Arts and Cultural worker participating in the study argued that:

- *Libraries are vital in ensuring that people experiment in their reading. I've run readers groups and people are adamant that they won't like something. You persuade them to read it and they love it. Choice and availability is vital, as otherwise people would get very bored. Readers change, so they need the range to assist them in their changes. [2].*

Indeed several respondents felt that through taking such risks they had progressed as readers. Usually this progression was from popular fiction to what they regarded as a more challenging read. As Michael Grade has argued, "Public Service involves taking risks to make it relevant for people's lives. It should not be wall to wall instant gratification … there is the capacity to do much more than that!"[1] He was talking about public service broadcasting but the same applies, or should, to the public provision of reading.

Sadly this was not the case in all the authorities included in our study and there was some criticism of the literary and physical quality of the material on offer. In one library, although the service stocked a wide range of popular material, it was not felt to cater for those who sought a more challenging read or "aesthetic escape". In another authority, the focus group members criticised the physical quality of the stock available to them. Indeed it is true that for a brief period, especially in the 1980s and early nineties the range of stock available in many UK public libraries was narrowly populist. This was, in part, the result of a reduction in public sector budgets, which often led to reduced book funds, and the market orientation of the times which frequently caused performance to be judged in terms of book issues. At that time public librarians, "in a welter of management speak, ICT and strategic plans, possibly may just have forgotten the importance of reading and its development" (Conway 2001). However, reading and reading development is now very much back on the professional and political agenda, and it is increasingly being promoted in school and public libraries.

When stock is allowed to deteriorate, there is evidence that people loose the library habit. A focus group from one of the authorities described above comprised twelve members, ten of whom had been regular users of the service. However, only two now used the library. A recent MORI survey also found that the poor quality of library stock was a major issue among users and non-users. (Audit Commission 2002). Cartwright's research (2001) suggests that while public library stock is valued for its archival nature, it is also frequently perceived as either dated or narrow. On the other hand the majority of her respondents referred to bookstore stock in positive terms.

[1] Michael Grade's comment was made during an *Off the Shelf* literature event in Sheffield on Wednesday 20th October1999.

Browsing

The range of stock is also crucial to another public library activity, that of browsing. This is an activity that benefits people in different ways. As one respondent observed:

- *There's a certain independence of wandering up and down the shelves, and wondering about looking at this, that or the other, and then making up your own mind. [F/55/19].*

Previous research confirms that browsing plays a major part in the reader's selection of reading matter. It is also is an activity that readers find pleasurable (see Goodall: 1989; Jennings & Sear: 1986). As one of our respondents admitted:

- *I can spend hours just looking or browsing, I think you find the best book for you that way. [F/45/5].* Through browsing, readers are able to satisfy their desire to select something to take home with them that day (Lee1996). There is also what one of our respondents described as, *that lucky dip element of picking a book off the shelf and being absolutely enchanted with it. [F/65/12].*

For others, the range of stock enabled them to satisfy a particular reading requirement.
Several respondents described how at times, their reading needs were determined by their mood. The choice of reading to suit a particular mood was something that fascinated the designers of the Book Forager initiative. This has attracted a good deal of media attention. Not least because Britain's increasingly downmarket newspapers found it helped people to seek out a "sexy" read. In partnership with Applied Psychology Research it resulted in a web site, which enabled a potential reader to select a book which matched her or his requirements. The web page, " offers an easy way to find the kind of reading you are looking for. ...For example if you want a happy read click on the Happy/Sad bar. ...The best matches will be given first...Forager is also able to start from an individual book title and search for mood matches".

Users also described how, in more traditional ways, they obtained a particular title or pre-planned choice through the library stock. Often, the title would not be available directly from the shelf but they would reserve it. They drew satisfaction in knowing that the range of stock was such that they could obtain the required material. An added strength of the public library book is that it enables continuing availability and extended choice over many years. Several respondents used the library to obtain out of print stock, which would otherwise be unavailable to them. One confessing:- *Some of it is very obscure, but because of the library I know I can get my hands on it. It's a real source of pleasure. [F/45/12].*

At the other end of the spectrum, other respondents wanted the opportunity to see books by new writers. They felt it important for new authors to be given an audience through the library and for libraries to support creative output. They emphasised the responsibility of the library for displaying new work *for people ... to experience. If there were no libraries writers who barely exist now... would cease. Libraries are a way of getting their books into all corners of England. [F/55/13].*

Social activity

Previous research (Linley and Usherwood 1998) has suggested that the library can bring social cohesion to a community, and this was reflected in the present study. It demonstrated that obtaining books from the public library satisfies both an individual interest and a social purpose. The library was described as something:

which makes a community a community. There's nowhere else we can go which is a public place for books and information like that and I feel we would have a much more fragmented community without a provision like that. Even if you're not using it on a daily basis I know I can go to a place where people have got books and kept them dry clean, and safe and I can go and use them when I want to ... [M/30/7].

Respondents also described how the library helps them to overcome social isolation. For instance, several described how when they move home, one of the first things they do is join the library and take out some books.

- *When I moved here, on the second day I took the kids down to the library. The house was in chaos but it was important. I feel that the library orientates you in the community. It's the heart and once I joined I was able to settle. [F/30/5].*

For another reader using the library invoked the feeling of citizenship. This particular person had been medically retired and was having difficulty coming to terms with being ill. Having been used to having a full and active life she felt that she had lost much of her purpose to life. Recently the housebound service had started delivering books to her. The difference this made to her was considerable.

- *When I was well I used to use the library all the time. Now they bring the books to me at home ...it's really helped as I feel that to some extent I am still functioning. I've still got something to offer and I feel like it's bought me back into society. [F/45/8].*

A real world statement that supports the view of a recent commentator that, "we are brought closer to other members of our community through the very act of sharing books with them" (Financial Times 2002).

Summary

This paper has been concerned with what might be described as the uniqueness of the library experience. It has not dealt in great detail with the role of staff. However the data in our report, and the practical knowledge of professionals and users, suggest a significant role for librarians as intermediaries in the reading experience. Moreover they can enhance that experience via reader development, fiction promotion and other activities. There is not time to go into further detail here, but such topics are considered more closely in the full report of the project, *Checking the Books*. (Toyne & Usherwood 2001)
The research indicates that the public library makes a significant contribution to the reading experience of individuals and communities. Despite the introduction of new services it is still regarded as being as synonymous with books, and as the natural place for readers, and those who wish to develop their reading. For many the public library is still the preferred provider of imaginative literature, although it cannot afford to remain complacent in the face of competition from book superstores and a range of other organizations. Although the positive factors outweigh the negative the data do indicate that the experience can include both. That having been said there can be little doubt that by providing public access to works of imagination the public library is seen as offering additional benefits, real added values, which are rarely matched elsewhere.

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